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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that debate about the need for renewal in undergraduate education should take a back seat to implementation of requisite changes. Evaluation of the renewal process should include obstacles to reform, especially ideological disagreements, time budgets, and reward structures. Five initiatives are proposed to advance the goal of providing a quality undergraduate experience: (1) revitalization of the undergraduate curriculum to include development of general education courses; (2) building a career-oriented emphasis into a liberal arts context; (3) leadership from professors and administrators with a particular dedication to and talent for undergraduate education; (4) better guidance for students on how to constitute their undergraduate careers; and (5) experimentation with curricular options and course formats. Renewal must be led ultimately by college and university presidents, working with faculty, governing boards, students, and external interests. Evaluation should only be used up to the limits of responsible methodology and not be oversold. (JDD)

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RENEWING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE IRVINE GROUP

As it should be, the ideal content of an undergraduate's education has long been debated. On campus, academicians push for changes along widely divergent lines and, off campus, political and other leaders demand reform because of perceived educational failures or threats to cohesiveness in American society. Overall, nervousness about America's ability to compete in the world has provoked questions about how best to prepare students for an ever more technologically driven future.

Pressures are growing for reform. Among the highly publicized criticisms leveled at U.S. colleges and universities are students' cultural illiteracy, inability to write, reduced levels of math and scientific understanding, and lack of international awareness. Corporations complain about having to provide remedial education. Also, many institutions are not coping well with expansion of America's ethnic diversity.

Although American universities and colleges have responded to these and similar issues in the past and have delivered a high quality experience for their students, one national study after another has called for further reform. While the currently fashionable tone of alarm is often overplayed, the proposition that undergraduates should receive better educations cannot be ignored.

Further debate about the need for renewal can now take a back seat to implementation of requisite changes. Five years is a reasonable goal. Such implementation need not take some flight of fancy. Although better teachers or student preparation, less racial disharmony and financial stress would yield an improved undergraduate experience, reforms within the present context of the American professorial and student experience can commence without prior structural changes.

American higher education has produced perhaps the world's best professional and graduate schools, where the interests of professors and students reasonably coincide. The same secure standard of accomplishment can be achieved at the undergraduate level.

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During the 1980's, many institutions made significant changes in their undergraduate programs. Curricular reforms, tougher standards, and statements of commitment have been publicized. Critics have often overlooked such genuine progress, including improved foreign language and writing skills of undergraduates and more rigorous teacher training. But while there has been great interest in undergraduate curriculum revitalization, the sense lingers that results have been disappointing.

Core issues have too often been avoided. Hodgepodge courses and experiences have passed for undergraduate education. Student interests have been infrequently consulted, although it is possible to construct a meaningful experience around student interests. There are plenty of other issues, too.

Develop Realistic Thinking to Get Renewal Under Way

Over the past decade, undergraduate renewal has relied on curricular patterns that have not worked well. Outmoded distribution requirements, for example, where students select courses from broad academic fields usually have failed to accomplish what is intended. These courses amount to electives, not general education. For too many undergraduates, their educations do not fit into a coherent whole, and the distribution of courses is more frequently the result of campus political considerations than of educational ones. Distribution courses, often taught by teaching assistants, can be dull. Undergraduates commonly dislike them, and faculty members consider them poor assignments.

The scale and diversity of American higher education require that each college and university will follow a different course of action. Though the order and complexity in reform is high, merely reconfiguring the undergraduate curriculum, dropping or adding elements without addressing fundamental topics achieves little. Careful evaluation of the renewal process should include obstacles to reform, especially ideological disagreements, time budgets, and reward structures.

In the first instance, ideological viewpoints on undergraduate education oversimplify what needs to be done. Conservatives seek a return to touchstone values at a time when traditional ways of enforcing social cohesion have disappeared. Non-conservatives note the array of demographic, global, and technological pressures confronting the nation and conclude that opening the undergraduate experience to almost everything is advisable. Neither orientation is very helpful in providing guidance for students. Institutions should engage in curricular renewal as free of ideological taint as possible. The

undergraduate curriculum should not become the place to work out ideological frustrations.

Reform can also founder on conflicts about time budgets or what courses should have priority in the curriculum. Limited time exists for undergraduates to take important skill, general education, and elective courses, in addition to courses required for major study fields. Students have succeeded in pushing for more electives and professors in protecting majors. As a result, a cohesive general education program, taking into account the total undergraduate experience, has been squeezed out. Disputes over time budgets have aborted many reform movements.

Finally, conflicts generated by bias against undergraduate education, typical in comprehensive institutions, can turn reform into a battleground. Professors are rewarded at most institutions for their specialties, often their research, rendering many of them ill-equipped to teach undergraduate courses. As a result, survey courses are often poorly taught. Overspecialization works well at professional and graduate school levels, but it can undermine the undergraduate experience. Improvement in reward structures must be addressed squarely if genuine renewal is to occur.

Groundwork for Reform

To pursue policy and curricular reforms successfully, campus leadership is essential. But whose responsibility is it? Curricular initiatives ideally rest with the faculty, although the record of faculty success in leading substantial reform of general education is spotty. As noted, faculty reward structures mitigate against attention to undergraduate education. Despite these problems, the faculty's ownership of general education remains an important reform principle.

Faculty leaders need to make a clear call for undergraduate renewal. With faculty participation, revitalization will take a major forward step, but lack of faculty participation must not scuttle reform.

Next in line to lead renewal are deans and provosts; appointment of a dean of undergraduate education can be an effective device. Leadership can be shared, but some level of the campus hierarchy must stand and be counted on undergraduate reform issues.

Ultimately, it is the president who must make sure that conditions for renewal exist. College and university presidents must assure that coalitions of faculty members and academic administrators are formed to sustain the revitalization process. Reform will be less likely without such coalitions; authentic

commitment of faculty members within the coalition is very important. Patience combined with long-term educational objectives will produce the steady, required pace for incremental change.

To underpin campus leadership, incentives for reform should be part of the strategy. Higher education has long demonstrated its responsiveness to external admonitions. External incentives, supported by public reaction against weak standards, poor basic curricula, and the alleged overselling of liberal arts degrees, are particularly appropriate. American higher education is burdened by a plethora of entrenched special interests. In opposition, public policy-makers, especially legislators and governors, philanthropists, advisory and governing board members, and even regional accrediting bodies, would do well to develop incentives for reform. These incentives may involve standards, policy requirements, faculty reward structures, prizes, targeted resources, recognitions, budgetary priorities, and other devices.

Of course, each institution will determine the content of its own general, liberal arts program through which undergraduates can achieve a limited list of fundamental competencies. Each institution should have a simple statement of policy, perhaps including the following elements: general education courses required of every degree-seeking student, whether in a two- or four-year college or research university; minimum standards of academic performance particular to each institution; and enforceable standards for student performance which include developmental help, but also warnings, probation, and suspension.

Renewal of the undergraduate experience must also be accompanied by sound advisement. National model programs exist; institutions should adopt one of them.

For further guidance, educators would do well to listen to what their undergraduates have been saying about their own experiences. While purists and utilitarians debate what students need to learn about the world beyond the classroom, students speak to a wide range of contemporary threats, as they see them, including nuclear missiles, AIDS, famine, and competition for jobs. Students rightly oppose a curriculum devoid of career and cosmopolitan sensitivity. Institutions need to make their curricula responsive.

Evaluation of what has been accomplished is yet another issue. Evaluation of the undergraduate experience must not become a club in the hands of politicians or other external interests pressing their own curricular viewpoints. Evaluation is necessary for developing constructive criticism to inform the campus debate, but higher education leaders need to beware of those preaching the religion of accountability defined as

assessment. Often such preachments are intended either to promote an ideologically oriented course of study or to manipulate resource allocations for aims other than quality. Evaluation should also include non-quantifiable opinion. Colleges and universities, left with the task of figuring how to make assessment work, must take into account all these caveats and not be swept along by faddism.

Irvine Group Recommendations to Achieve Genuine Reform

Assuming that requisite leadership is present, relevant issues are addressed, and proper attention is given to the groundwork for reform, the Irvine Group commends five initiatives that could apply to virtually any institution. Though not panaceas, these initiatives will advance the goal of providing a quality undergraduate experience for the ones who count the most, the students.

o First, revitalization of the undergraduate curriculum must include development of general education courses, either ones that are distributed by an educationally sound device or are required of everyone. These core courses must be made meaningful and stimulating, although they will require long and skillful preparation. Further, they will systematically build fundamental competencies across the curriculum and in student life outside the classroom. Reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, reasoning, and studying are on the College Board's list of competencies. The National Endowment for the Humanities' "50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students" provides a welcome outline.

Undergraduate education will demand thoughtfulness and the resources required for academic quality. There is no way around it. If sufficient commitment is not present, neither the president nor governing board members are adequately fulfilling their stewardship responsibilities. Each institution should present an easily understood, published plan outlining their version of an optimal undergraduate experience.

o Second, there is nothing inconsistent about building a career-oriented emphasis into a liberal arts context. Courses should be oriented toward development of broad competencies necessary in careers and the application of liberal arts to professional and community life experiences. Such programs should commence in the freshman year. Economic pressures on students and the nation justify this emphasis, as does response to the growing fractionalization or diversity in American society, on and off campus. A useful education is in the American tradition.

Beyond course content, greater career emphasis can be accomplished in two ways. Articulation can be improved with professional schools or, in the case of community colleges, with either upper-level options available at universities and liberal arts colleges or graduate programs located elsewhere. Also, credit and non-credit courses on career and professional options for undergraduates can be developed. The orientation of particular professional groups to an issue can be a standard curricular feature of general education courses. If such courses are problem-oriented -- ones that deal with environmental issues, war and peace, and ethical concerns, for example -- the career element will fit neatly.

Some institutions have successfully utilized a standard freshman course on how to plan the undergraduate experience, including the relevancy of liberal arts courses; how to use institutional resources such as the library, placement center, and remedial services; and how best to examine career alternatives, including graduate school requirements. Many other innovations are worth considering.

o Third, those professors and administrators with a particular dedication to and talent for undergraduate education should be involved as leaders in its revitalization. Undergraduate programs cannot be allowed to become the playthings of uninterested university factions, contingents that too often favor specialization over general education.

Panels of students too should be consulted routinely to consider the adequacy of academic advisement, general quality of student life, and diversity in the student body, among other issues. Not only must students decide how best to use their four years of study, they need to advise on how their student lives mesh best with their total learning experience.

Further, universities, especially those with large graduate programs, cannot provide quality undergraduate experiences without rewarding professors as much for their dedication to undergraduate education as their graduate specialties. Teaching centers, release time for course preparation, and teacher training for graduate teaching assistants are among other options. The place of undergraduate education within research universities presents special challenges, but nationally, some of the best doctoral-granting universities have also developed some of the best undergraduate programs.

o Fourth, undergraduate students must receive better guidance on how to constitute their undergraduate careers. On many campuses, guidance is a greater problem than curricular content. Undergraduates need help in appreciating linkage

between their academic and extracurricular lives, not to mention their liberal arts educations and eventual career choices.

Computer programs are one good option in providing students with necessary information. Freshmen should receive printouts, tailored for them, demonstrating curricular paths from their lower-level general education courses to preparation for various professions. If properly done, these printouts, which have been pioneered at institutions as diverse as Miami-Dade Community College and Brigham Young University, provide both correct and relevant data. Student-professor consultation is valuable, but the printout assures that both parties will be working from a common text as a basis for discussion.

o Fifth, colleges and universities need to experiment with curricular options and course formats. Undergraduate programs need never become stale. Volumes have been written on the subject; liberal arts colleges and very large universities alike have developed inspired programs. They should be evaluated to uncover course content variations, calendar formats, and anything else likely to add excitement to undergraduate experiences for students and faculty members alike. Experimentation to develop courses that confront difficult issues like ethics, quality, and the collision of technology and humanity, is never out of style.

Getting on with the Task

Renewing the undergraduate curriculum is a necessary response to changes that confront American society. Such reorientation is needed; colleges and universities that have not yet responded would do well to get on with the task. There is no crisis, though there is urgency. Renewal must be led ultimately by college and university presidents, working with faculty, governing boards, students, and external interests. Incentives for change should be emphasized, blending competency-based liberal arts education and career direction. Evaluation should only be used up to the limits of responsible methodology and not be oversold.

The Irvine Group's five recommendations can make renewal successful. No perfect plan exists; each college or university must consult its heritage and mission before setting its institutional compass. Still, requiring well taught general education courses and setting and enforcing academic performance standards should be part of any revitalization project. Myriad pressures facing the American democracy demand that strengthening an undergraduate's experience must rank high during the 1990's on higher education's action agenda.

Even if colleges and universities consider all these issues and establish an optimal foundation for reform, improvement will

always be needed. Given the dynamic nature of the American academy, "Our undergraduate education is perfect!" is a claim unlikely to be reported widely.

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